

## **General Education: A Literature Review**

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Spring 2011

The General Education Review Task Force received its charge from the Faculty Senate to review the general education program at Western Carolina University (WCU) and to make recommendations for changes in the current program. This report is offered as a survey of what is currently known about best practices in general education.

While much has been written about general education, the literature review working group quickly found that most of what has been published has been in the forms of opinion and discussion. In order to uncover the most relevant and reliable information, the articles for this review were limited to high-quality research studies and influential reports. In concluding that recent studies had accounted for prior work, and because the review group wished to focus on the latest information available, only studies and reports published since 2000 were considered.

### **General Education**

General education is an “important feature of the student academic experience in American colleges and universities,” that comprises nearly 30 percent of the undergraduate curriculum (Brint, Proctor, Murphy, Turk-Bicakci, & Hanneman, 2009, p. 605). Leskes and Wright (2005) defined three “anchoring concepts” related to general education: a) clear programmatic purpose for general education; b) resonance with the institution’s distinctive mission, and c) transparent, powerful goals and outcomes of learning.

Warner and Koepfel (2009) emphasized the importance of general education to undergraduate education, “Every institution of higher education is required by its accrediting body to offer some form of general education,” Specifically, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools’ (SACS) *Principles of Accreditation* (2010) states their requirements:

In each undergraduate degree program, the institution requires the successful completion of a general education component at the collegiate level that (1) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree, (2) ensures breadth of knowledge, and (3) is based on a coherent rationale . . . [and] for baccalaureate programs, [requires] a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent. These credit hours are to be drawn from and include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics. The courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession . . . (p. 17).

In 2009 The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) surveyed 433 colleges and universities and identified the percentage of institutions that included the following overlapping models and elements of general education programs: distribution models (80%);

common intellectual experiences (41%); thematic required courses (36%); upper level requirements (33%); core curriculum (30%); and learning communities (24%).

Brint, et al. (2009) analyzed general education requirements in the United States over a quarter century, 1975-2000. Traditional models of general education – core distribution areas and liberal arts – persisted through the 1975-2000 period, and two newer models – cultures and ethics, and civic/utilitarian preparation – originated early in the period and also persisted.

According to Brint, et al., during the 25-year period, general education curricula primarily expanded and diversified to include more subject areas. This change generally occurred incrementally, through addition and elimination of individual courses. Expansion of general education programs was driven partly by a perceived need to demonstrate enhanced career outcomes for graduates, called for by political and business stakeholders. The increased breadth of general education was also partly due to the “guild interests” of faculty who see inclusion of their courses in the general education curriculum as securing them to the university (p. 39). The authors also identified a trend toward diversification of requirements, with the addition of subjects such as academic skills, gender and racial-ethnic diversity, and non-Western cultures. The authors concluded by making the case for thematically integrated groups of courses:

In recent years, these proposals have included, most notably, the introduction of thematic “bundles” of courses to provide perspectives on such important issues as race relations, environmental sustainability, energy and society, and terrorism (Carnegie Foundation, 2008; University of California, 2007). A number of universities have experimented successfully with this approach. It is possible that the new wave of thematically bundled courses will provide a way to bridge the guild interests of department-based faculty while harkening to the spirit of the original general education movement by encouraging a confrontation between knowledge drawn from many disciplines and issues of great moment. (p. 635)

McNertney and Ferandino (2010) described the process of general education reform at Texas Christian University (TCU). TCU embraced a hybrid general education model with elements of both distribution and core curriculum models, and a common intellectual experience. The authors offered some very useful suggestions on how to manage the mechanics of general education reform. Finally, describing a problem that WCU will likely strive to avoid, the authors also explained how they solved the dilemma of requiring an unusually large number of general education credits (by allowing for very significant double-counting of hours in student programs).

### **Student Views, Achievement, and Outcomes**

Student motivations for attending college have changed significantly over time (McNertney & Ferrandino, 2010). Between 1970 and 2006, the percentage of college students who rated “being well off financially” as an “essential” or “very important” goal rose from 36.2 to 73.6 percent, while the percentage of those students who attached similar importance to “acquiring a meaningful philosophy of life” fell from 79.0 to 39.6 percent (Bok, 2006, p. 26). According to

Bok, this change in student goals may have accompanied the increase in college tuition and other costs, which calls for an increased material return to justify the financial outlay for college.

A series of studies that examined student attitudes toward general education courses indicated that such courses are not valued by students (Miller & Sundre, 2008). While students enter college placing equal value on all of their courses, by the second year of college there is a significant difference in students' motivation to achieve in general education courses as compared to their performance in non-general education courses: "Students became only *slightly* less motivated to learn and perform well in their overall coursework while becoming *much* less motivated to learn and perform in their general education courses" (p. 164). Miller and Sundre concluded that students believe that general education courses are less engaging, and not as in-depth as courses that are not classified as general education.

Other research has demonstrated that an emphasis on liberal studies has positive impacts on student achievement in areas such as reading comprehension, writing, and science reasoning (Pascarella, Wonaik, Seifert, Cruce, & Blaich, 2005). Of particular interest is that these gains were more significant for students who entered college with low scores, and for people of color.

Laird, Niskode-Dossett and Kuh (2009) examined what general education courses contribute to essential learning outcomes, using data from the 2005 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), which included approximately 11,000 respondents from 109 institutions. The authors concluded that "compared with non-GECS [general education courses], GECS are structured to a greater extent to promote intellectual skills (writing and speaking clearly and effectively, thinking critically, and learning effectively on one's own) and individual and social responsibility (understanding oneself, understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, developing a personal code of values and ethics, and developing a deepened sense of spirituality)" (p. 80).

### **First Year Experience and Retention**

First Year Experience (FYE) programs are often connected with both general education programs (Wehlburg, 2010) and retention (Orillian, 2009; Strayhorn, 2009). The AACU (2009) survey mentioned above found that 58 percent of its member institutions had FYE as a particular aspect of their general education programs. Wehlburg (2010) argued that while FYE programs have many goals, "most [of them] focused on introducing the first-year student to the institution, preparing them for university-level education, and affording some element of general education (global understanding, cultural awareness, or ethical thinking)" (p. 9). Wehlburg concluded that FYE programs can become instruments to communicate expectations to students and assure a common baccalaureate experience.

Although Strayhorn (2009) analyzed a first-year seminar that was much different from the kind of experience offered at WCU (the course was more similar to our USI 130 experience), he concluded that "First-year seminars that bring students in contact with advisors frequently are believed to be most effective in terms of promoting student success" (p. 12). In order to improve this relationship, Strayhorn also suggested that "[w]hile first-year seminars are largely designed to assist students in their adjustment to college, mere participation does not guarantee integration

or satisfaction. Based on findings from this analysis, educators should design first-year seminars that integrate both academic and social learning outcomes” (p. 23).

Porter and Swing (2006) surveyed approximately 20,000 first-year students attending 45, four-year institutions, and analyzed institutional data to comprehend how specific aspects of first-year seminars affected early desire to persist. Their literature review revealed numerous studies that demonstrated a relationship between positive intent to persist and enrollment in first year seminars. The study examined the impacts of specific aspects of first year seminars, including study skills, campus policies, campus engagement, peer connection, and health information. Of those, study skills and health education were found to be significantly related to student intent to persist. The authors theorized that health education was valued by students because it was personal to their lives, and faculty seemed to care about them. Course syllabi and selection of topics for the first-year seminar were considered by the authors to be an opportunity for the creation of outcomes to align with institutional goals.

Harvey, Drew, and Smith (2006) also examined the connection between first-year experience and retention. The “key factors in ensuring progression appeared to be: personal goal setting and motivation; family and friends; paid work and financial situation; peer support; institutional habits; cultural capital; prior information and choices; expectations; satisfaction; teaching and learning process and engagement with teachers; assessment and discussion of progress” (p. 5). The authors concluded that the FYE needed to be a “holistic and evolving experience,” with a focus on “building on their strengths, rather than do[ing] things to students on the basis of a deficit model that emphasizes inadequacies” (p. 8).

Orillion (2009) studied the relationships between interdisciplinary approaches and student outcomes. Citing Tsui (2001), Orillion maintained “that faculty at research universities were less likely than faculty at colleges and universities that supported instructional efforts to engage in practices that would develop students’ critical-thinking skills.” She went on to conclude that “[t]hese choices have significant effects on student learning and retention” (p. 16).

### **Capstone Courses, Learning Communities, and Relationships with Disciplines**

Huber and Huthchings (2004) made the case for placing integrative learning at the center of educational mission, something that we have already done at WCU in the context of the QEP. The authors found that capstone experiences can serve both learning and assessment functions.

Hawthorne, Kelsch, and Steen (2010) contended that colleges and universities have an opportunity to link general education and the overall undergraduate experience with major course work through the capstone experience. They claimed that this requirement introduces a means of reinforcing the goals of the program for students who transferred in with most of their general education coursework completed. Further, the capstone experience, because it is offered in the context of the major programs, serves as an effective means of integrating undergraduate experiences with those of the major.

According to Hawthorne, et al. (2010) an unexpected benefit for the capstone approach at the University of North Dakota has been that many faculty members teaching these capstone courses are modifying them to emphasize general education goals more explicitly:

The standards required to achieve validation of courses are higher, with direct assessment of clearly articulated goals required as part of revalidation. Because more departments are offering courses to meet the special emphasis requirements, general education goals are being integrated at all levels of the curriculum and in courses taught by a greater range of faculty. The general education capstone commonly doubles as a disciplinary capstone, so departments are focused in a new way on general education outcomes. (p. 32)

Henscheid, Breitmeyer, and Mercer (2000) conducted a survey of senior seminars and capstone courses across all types of American colleges and universities and found that such courses are usually designed to give students an understanding and appreciation for single academic disciplines. The authors concluded that senior seminar and capstone courses usually focused on specialization and preparation for work in the field of the academic major. Furthermore, the authors identified the following areas for possible development and improvement:

- Experiences that took students out of the classroom, either into the work place, the community, or an educational travel experience were the least likely instructional components in senior seminars and capstone courses.
- Generally, senior seminars and capstone courses were taught by individual faculty members and most courses, including interdisciplinary courses, were administered by individual academic departments.
- The majority of senior seminars and capstone courses were not part of a comprehensive assessment process. When senior seminars and capstone courses were evaluated, it was by the students and faculty members who participated in these courses.

AACU (2007) investigated the FYE, learning communities, and capstone experiences as inventive educational methods that are also well suited for assessing students' collective learning. However, the study reports that these methods usually remain optional rather than required.

## **Assessment**

The literature related to the subject of assessment tends to revolve around safe assumptions in this new era of accountability to state legislators, to accrediting agencies, and to students. First, there is a need to articulate learning outcomes clearly and in relation to the mission of the institution and its major programs. Second, arriving at a coherent and reliable way of assessing these outcomes is made complex by a wide range of factors, including the amount of choice that students have in the general education programs, faculty engagement, and institutional emphasis. What follows are brief summaries of some of these conclusions found in leading studies.

Terenzini (2010) defined assessment as “the measurement of the educational impact of an institution on its students” (p. 29). He presented a thorough outline of the problems that arise when creating, implementing, and instituting student outcome standards in the areas of

definitional issues, organizational/implementation issues, and methodological issues. Many of the suggestions were very practical, such as starting with small pilot projects to build support, and inventorying existing data collection points.

The authors of the Lumina Foundation Report (2011) contend that “[r]egardless of their degree level, students certified to go forward as adaptive, creative and entrepreneurial persons must demonstrate competence in understanding and applying differing cultural, political and technological perspectives” (p 8).

AACU (2009) measured the prevalence of specified learning outcomes and documented recent trends in curriculum change in general education and assessment. The authors concluded that although the surveyed institutions felt they had developed clear learning goals with requirements linked to those goals, they did not feel that a highly useful assessment of student achievement of those goals had been achieved. The authors also contended that there is not appropriate integration of general education with student’s major requirements.

Brint et al. (2009) discussed the importance of “accountability” in the context of legislatures who fund universities and of employers who express dissatisfaction with the skill sets of new employees. Laird et al. (2009) affirmed the value of general education courses (as opposed to non-general education courses) as a vehicle for more effectively delivering and assessing “intellectual skills . . . and individual and social responsibility” (p. 80). Warner and Koeppe (2009) concluded that “the more options a student has to fulfill general education requirements, the more assessment must focus on skills and broader knowledge rather than specific content” (p. 257).

AACU (2007) contended that on the basis of clear outcomes and expectations “assessments should be imbedded at milestone points in the curriculum” (p. 41). These assessments should include portfolios and other capstone experiences that represent “authentic performances” of student learning

AACU (2009) found that when asked to rate their institutions two thirds of general education program administrators reported strong evidence of clear learning goals and requirements linked to those goals. However, only half reported strong evidence in assessing their student’s achievement of those goals. Factors that strongly correlated with clear learning goals and requirements linked to those goals were: broad assessments, integration of general education and majors, and a capstone project for student

## **Future Directions**

According to AACU (2007) learning goals should not be limited to the general education program—some must be fulfilled by major courses. Instead, the authors contended that a college curriculum should intentionally foster learning, “across multiple fields of study, wide-ranging knowledge of sciences, cultures, and society; high-level intellectual skills; an active commitment to personal and social responsibility; and the demonstrated ability to apply learning to complex problems and challenges” (p. 4). Thus serving a diverse student body drawn from a diverse population precludes any one-size-fits-all approach (AACU, 2007, p. 4). Scope and depth of

learning are now perceived as more valuable than particular content, given that students will have to function in an increasingly complex and rapidly-changing social, technological environment (AACU, 2007, p. 13). The authors concluded that fostering flexibility will be increasingly more important than any particular factual or theoretical knowledge.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill refashioned its general education program to focus on “making connections” (Smith & Kruse, 2009). Although a significant portion of that effort was focused on internationalizing the curriculum (which seems less than a primary consideration here at Western), much of the reform did involve encouraging cognitive integration of knowledge across disciplines. They encountered numerous challenges. A planned increase in foreign language requirements was delayed because instructional staff could not be hired. A large and highly bureaucratized research university, where faculty members have more competing demands on their time and attention, provides a poor environment for sustained attention to curricular reform, even when consensus is reached on desired learning outcomes (Smith & Kruse, 2009, p. 118). A smaller regional comprehensive institution may be a better venue for implementing a coherent and effective general education program.

Huber and Hutchings (2004) identified useful types of learning experiences that universities have developed, including “connected learning through first-year seminars, learning communities, interdisciplinary studies programs, capstone experiences, individual portfolios, advising, student self-assessment, and other initiatives” (p. 13). But for them these approaches are too often isolated and un-integrated among general education, major, and elective experiences: “[A] variety of opportunities to develop the capacity for integrative learning should be available to all students throughout their college years, and should be a cornerstone of a twenty-first-century education” (p. 13).

Huber and Hutchings identified benefits generated by programs that are justified as intentionally structured to achieve well-articulated outcomes. “Students need programs of study that will help them understand the nature and advantages of integrative learning and assist them in pursuing their college experience in intentionally connected ways” (p. 13). The need for a curriculum to emphasize learning as an intentional process aiming at a coherent and explicated goal (AACU, 2007, pp. 4, 26) may seem desirable, but Huber and Hutchings (2004) found such approaches are rarely implemented well, much less attempted and curricula are often presented to students as: here are your requirements: go out and satisfy them.

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